

Peat Production and Protection In Iowa

by Carol A. Thompson

Peat deposits do occur in Iowa, though most people tend to associate them with Ireland or the more northern states and Canada. A site in Linn County was producing peat as early as 1866. The story of peat in Iowa, however, was foretold in an 1899 geological report on Worth County which noted, "Although of value as a fertilizer and in some localities used for fuel, the peat bogs ... are generally regarded as impediments to agricultural purposes and much is being done to eliminate them."

In the early 1900's, coal miners' strikes in the East and advances in mechanical harvesting methods renewed interest in peat as a fuel. The industry was short-lived however, as Iowa's peat has a high ash content and low combustible carbon and thus does not make a high-Btu fuel.



Hand-cut peat blocks are trucked from a field during the 1930 harvest.

No further mention was made of peat in state mineral reports until 1934-39 when one producer was listed, Colby Pioneer of Hanlontown in Worth County. Established in 1929, this business remains in operation today. A fascinating history written by founder John W. Colby describes some early uses for their peat, including packing around "ice-less ice cream shippers" and refrigerated lockers, as well as for shredded chick litter. He describes securing an Irishman experienced in cutting peat on the bogs of Kilarney, to supervise harvesting. In the 1930's and '40's, blocks of peat were still being cut by hand and transported by mules. It was shipped by rail to many other parts of the country, including California. During World War II when help was scarce, a bus load of 36

German prisoners from a camp in Algona arrived each day to help harvest the peat crop. Colby described them as good workers who enjoyed being out on "the moor," and he had many letters after they returned home, thanking him for his courtesy.



Experimental vacuum equipment for picking up and loading peat is tested in 1959.

By the late 1940's to early '50's, the focus of Iowa's peat industry shifted to horticultural uses. The state presently produces about 15,000 tons of peat annually, a minor amount compared to Michigan, which produces over 300,000 tons, a third of the nation's total. Because many peat deposits occurred in shallow basins on prime agricultural land, most have been drained. A recent search of county soil maps and high-altitude air photos revealed that all peat deposits listed by Survey geologist S.W. Beyer in 1908, representing over 15,000 acres, have been drained and are under agricultural production. Only those in public marshes or those less suitable for farming remain today.

In recent years, emphasis has shifted from utilization of peat to its conservation, with more attention being given to the state's smaller deposits. Many of these sites, called fens, occur on hillslopes and are associated with springs or seeps. Drainage is impractical because of the continual flow of groundwater supplying the fens. Often only one or two acres in extent, these unusual hydrologic sites harbor many rare plants, and recognition of their biological value and the need for their preservation is growing.

Photos courtesy of Colby Pioneer Peat Co.

Adapted from *Iowa Geology 1992, No. 17, Centennial Edition*, Iowa Department of Natural Resources